



Australian Bureau of Statistics

1002.0 - Australian Statistics Advisory Council - Annual Report, 2019-20

Previous ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 19/10/2020

Summary

Acknowledgement of Country and Copyright information

The Australian Statistics Advisory Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to their cultures and their Elders past and present.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2020

ISSN 01550780

This work is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence.

In all cases, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) must be acknowledged as the source when reproducing or quoting any part of an ABS publication or other product.

Please see the ABS website copyright statement for further details.

www.abs.gov.au

Letter of transmittal

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL



The Hon. Michael Sukkar MP
Minister for Housing and Assistant Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I have pleasure in submitting the Australian Statistics Advisory Council's annual report for the year ending 30 June 2020.

The report outlines the work and activities of the Council and is submitted to you for presentation to Parliament under sub-section 24(1) of the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975*.

The Annual Report is dated on the day I approved the text for printing.

Yours sincerely



Professor Gary Banks AO
Chairperson
21 September 2020

Foreword

FOREWORD



The Chairperson of ASAC,
Professor Gary Banks AO

The latter part of 2019–20 was dominated by disasters that have shaken our society and economy. The bushfires, and especially the COVID-19 pandemic, have placed demands on governments and citizens rarely experienced outside wartime. Crafting effective policies in such unusual circumstances is highly challenging, with a need for speed testing established systems designed for 'business as usual'.

This applies in particular to information sources and systems, on which effective decision-making relies. To be useful, information needed to monitor and evaluate key impacts, and thus to devise effective solutions, may need to be more granular than usual and available in as close to 'real time' as possible. These imperatives from the crisis have seen the ABS step up with a number of innovations and changes to its economic and other statistics that have been warmly commended by ASAC members. These were facilitated in part by investments in technological and system 'transformation' undertaken over recent years.

Some of the recent statistical enhancements have been achieved in partnership with other agencies, reaffirming the benefits that coordination and cooperation can bring. Instances of productive cooperation have also shown the potential gains from the ABS assuming a leadership role within the national statistical landscape. And, as emphasised by ASAC in previous reports, it has underlined the importance of ensuring that the ABS is adequately resourced on a permanent basis.

This annual report provides a brief account of ASAC's role and activities over the past financial year and areas of focus in 2020–21. The periodic meetings of the Council are central to its work and I thank members for their insightful contributions and their diligence in attending (including, by necessity, via a teleconference in May). On behalf of Council members, I would also like to thank the ASAC secretariat for its support throughout the year.

Finally, I should note that the Council was pleased to welcome Dr David Gruen, the recently appointed Australian Statistician, as an ex-officio member of ASAC. David had previously been a member of ASAC when Deputy Secretary at Treasury.

About ASAC

ABOUT ASAC

MISSION

To contribute to the effective development of Australia's statistical assets, by providing the Minister and the Statistician with independent, relevant and timely advice on national priorities.

ASAC was established by the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* (the ABS Act). Under subsection 18(1) of the ABS Act, the Council is to advise the Minister and the Australian Statistician on:

- (a) the improvement, extension and co-ordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;
- (b) annual and longer term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services; and
- (c) any other matters relating generally to those statistical services.

Subsection 24(1) of the ABS Act provides that: the Council must, as soon as practicable after 30 June in each year, prepare and submit to the Minister, for presentation to the Parliament, a report relating to matters connected with the operation of this Act.

The ABS Act enables both the relevant Minister and the Australian Statistician to seek advice from the Council on these matters. The Australian Statistician keeps the Council informed of key developments related to the ABS. The Chairperson meets with the Minister and Australian Statistician as appropriate to ensure relevant advice and assistance from the Council are made available to them.

ROLE AND OPERATIONS OF THE COUNCIL

ASAC contributes to ABS decision-making regarding statistical priorities and helps inform its assessment of risks and appropriate strategies, as well as being an advocate for a national statistical system that is adequately resourced and effectively managed.

The ABS Act provides that the Council shall consist of a part-time Chairperson, the Australian Statistician (ex officio), and between ten and twenty-two part-time members, including a senior official from each State and Territory nominated by the Premier or Chief Minister. In addition, the Council includes representatives from academia, business and community sectors. Council members are appointed for their ability to identify emerging issues and assist in promoting greater coordination nationally.

During 2019–20, the Minister responsible for the ABS and ASAC was the Hon. Michael Sukkar MP, Minister for Housing, Assistant Treasurer and Federal Member for Deakin. The Minister appoints the Council Chairperson and members, for five and three years respectively. Members are eligible for reappointment when their terms expire.

As at 30 June 2020, the Council membership totalled fourteen, including the Chairperson, Professor Gary Banks AO; the names and positions of members are detailed in the 'Membership of ASAC' section.

The Council typically meets in formal session three times a year, in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne (by rotation) as well as interacting out of session on any specific matters requiring its attention. During

2019–20, formal meetings were adapted to meet the requirements of COVID-19.

The Chairperson receives an annual fee as set by the Remuneration Tribunal, with other members serving in an honorary capacity. Members receive a prescribed travel allowance, where applicable, to support their attendance at meetings.

The office of the ASAC Secretary is held by Stephen Collett, Program Manager, Indigenous and Social Information Branch. Costs associated with the operations of ASAC are met from the ABS budget, and secretariat services are provided, as part of their wider duties, by ABS staff. Council secretariat services include: arranging and supporting meetings; administering ASAC activities and membership; and assisting with preparation of its Annual Report and any submissions, correspondence or papers to be issued under its authority or that of the Chairperson.

Future areas of focus for the Council are outlined in the '2020–21 ASAC Statement of Intent' section.

Year in review: 2019-20

YEAR IN REVIEW: 2019-20

The disasters experienced in the second half of 2019–20 — bushfires in Australia and the global COVID-19 pandemic — presented significant operational and statistical challenges to the ABS. The size of the disruption to the local and global economies, and the speed with which this occurred, required the ABS to find new ways to respond quickly to the needs of the Government and the Australian community. The Council commends the ABS for what it achieved.

The Council held three meetings during 2019–20: in August 2019, November 2019 and May 2020 (see 'ASAC 2019–20 meeting agenda' section for agendas). Due to restrictions associated with the pandemic, the May meeting was held via teleconference.

ABS WORK PROGRAM AND RESOURCING

The ABS' objectives for 2019–20 (as outlined in its Corporate Plan) were:

- to seek to ensure that ABS statistics are trusted and used to inform important decisions;
- to develop partnerships to enable better decisions; and
- to provide new statistics to support Australia's emerging priorities.

ASAC considers that the ABS performed very well against these objectives in what was an especially challenging year.

COVID-19 response

In particular, while providing core products and services, the ABS delivered a timely, innovative and collaborative response to demands associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following initiatives were regarded by the Council as particularly valuable:

- delivery of near real-time surveys of households and businesses, and early release of preliminary versions of core ABS statistics;
- development of new data sets and additional information to enhance existing products; and
- successful partnership projects, e.g. Weekly Payroll Jobs and Wages, achieved through collaboration between the ABS and the Australian Taxation Office accessing information from the Single Touch Payroll system.

The Council supports retention of some of the new and additional products in the ABS' ongoing work program.

The ABS discussed with the Council the operational challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and actions taken, e.g. no face-to-face interviews, redeployment of personnel to support the broader Australian Public Service etc.

ABS funding

While recognising the resource constraints involved, the Council has reiterated the importance of maintaining the quality and coverage of existing collections, and expanding them where there is likely to be a significant benefit. ASAC has accordingly continued to support the ABS receiving sufficient resources to maintain its high standing as Australia's national statistical agency.

2021 CENSUS OF POPULATION AND HOUSING

During the year, ASAC continued to monitor progress on preparations for the 2021 Census of Population and Housing, in which members maintain a keen interest.

In 2019, the Census program focussed on development and testing of systems and processes, which would shift towards mobilisation and operational readiness in 2020. Key learnings from the October 2019 test were shared with the Council at the May 2020 meeting. In response, the Council advised on matters related to communication and engagement, in particular the role of public advocacy and the preparation and testing of communication plans.

In 2020, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) undertook an audit of the ABS' preparedness for the 2021 Census. In March, responding to a request to its members from the ANAO, the Council submitted a collective response to the *ANAO Audit: Planning for the 2021 Census*. The submission (see 'ASAC submission to the ANAO' section) provides a summary of the Council's activities in relation to the Census. The Council affirmed the activities undertaken by the ABS to prepare for the 2021 Census, including lessons learnt from the experience of the 2016 Census.

ABS TRANSFORMATION INITIATIVES

The Statistical Business Transformation Program (SBTP) formally concluded on 30 June 2020. The SBTP was responsible for designing and developing the next generation of statistical business processes and infrastructure.

SBTP has driven improvements in the areas of data acquisition and dissemination. Infrastructure and systems achievements such as DataLab, which established a way for users to access microdata safely and through files that could be analysed with standard software, have enabled users to draw greater value and insights from existing data assets. More timely release of data through machine-to-machine Application Programming Interfaces (API) enabled users to receive key numbers immediately upon release. In addition to such technological achievements, SBTP also brought improved ways of engaging and collaborating with stakeholders to improve ABS products.

Heightened data demands as a result of the pandemic saw the ABS responding to reduce delivery times for critical data. The Council recognised the valuable role of the innovations involved.

However, some planned improvements to processing and analytical functions were not delivered, due to recognition of increased risk to the quality of statistics. ASAC supported the decisions made by the ABS and advises seeking opportunities in the future to address areas where risk can be further mitigated.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COMMUNITY TRUST

Maintaining public trust in ABS processes and published statistics remains a priority concern for the Council.

The heightened threat landscape, especially in times of global uncertainty, means data security is an

increasingly complex area that will demand more resources in order to maintain a secure environment.

In 2019, the Council provided advice on an ABS assessment of security priorities, supporting the need to invest further in cybersecurity, better assess and respond to the threat landscape, and partner with other government agencies on security matters. These areas for enhancement would contribute to providing necessary assurance to the public ahead of the 2021 Census.

The Council also provided advice on the possible establishment of a Data Ethics Advisory Committee (DEAC), and a model for enhancing citizen engagement with the ABS. The Council's feedback on the possibility for a DEAC centred on the importance of establishing a clear role for such a committee and how it would operate in the context of broader government data policy.

ABS' ROLE WITHIN AN EVOLVING INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Ongoing reforms to the data system, and the ABS' role and responsibilities, remained a focus in 2019–20. The Council was updated by the ABS on developments across the wider landscape, in particular cross-agency collaboration on data integration and the ABS' partnership with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) to develop legislation on data availability and transparency.

In 2020, COVID-19 markedly altered the operating landscape and tested the ABS' readiness to deliver critical data and services. ASAC welcomed the sharing and efficient use of data to address emerging priorities, and cooperative engagement by the ABS with governments and the private sector to ensure critical data was provided in a timely fashion.

CAPABILITY BUILDING

In 2019, ASAC was consulted on strategic directions for the ABS, including the building of data capability across governments. The Council welcomed the attention to capability building. Feedback included:

1. The ABS may need to consider balancing the pursuit of its leadership and co-ordination role in capability building in the wider Australian Public Service with its core purpose to produce statistics so it can make the most of opportunities to take a stronger role in the data landscape and to maximise the value it can provide Australia.
2. Increasing the visibility of the ABS' expertise is central to establishing its leadership role in capability building. There is an opportunity to convince stakeholders of the importance of core data skills and the ABS is uniquely placed to contribute.
3. There are opportunities to promote the ABS' own capability in these areas and in particular with respect to:
 - positively influencing stakeholders' views about the importance of data access and engagement;
 - growing the collective data capability across all governments; and
 - educating stakeholders about what constitutes data quality and the implications of using data that are not fit for purpose.

The Council believes that, as Australia's pre-eminent national statistical agency, the ABS needs to engage with its counterparts internationally, both to learn from them and to share its experiences. However, it is important that such engagement continues to be strategically targeted to yield the best payoffs.

CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL PRIORITIES

ASAC meetings provide a useful opportunity for the ABS to receive information and advice regarding statistical issues across the jurisdictions and sectors represented.

In addition to challenges in common posed by the bushfires and COVID-19 in 2019–20, Council members highlighted the following:

1. The importance of the Census and other population data in understanding and responding to significant developments in population growth.
2. Gaining insights into dimensions of intergenerational wellbeing.
3. Expanding data integration and data sharing further to allow the increased use of linked data.
4. Collaboration between agencies, and engagement between public and private enterprise to inform service delivery, capability building and knowledge sharing.
5. Improving Indigenous data to help support realisation of better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 6.

Year ahead: 2020-21

YEAR AHEAD: 2020-21

With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing well into this financial year, there will be an ongoing requirement for the ABS to demonstrate agility and leadership. The Council will continue to advise and lend support. Its priorities for 2020–21 accordingly remain similar to the previous year. ASAC's Statement of Intent for 2020–21 formally sets these out (see '2020–21 ASAC Statement of Intent' section).

ABS WORK PROGRAM

Current levels of funding challenge the ability of the ABS to produce the current range of statistics as well as pursuing development and innovation in the longer term. An increase to the ABS' base appropriation is seen by the Council as a necessary investment to ensure Australia's national statistical infrastructure can meet the needs of governments both in the recovery phase and into the future.

As part of this effort, governments and the wider community will require a range of timely economic indicators to inform and evaluate policy responses. The Council considers that the ABS is well positioned to continue to provide and expand such essential indicators and is ready to assist with advice on work prioritisation and opportunities.

The Council strongly supports efforts by the ABS to maintain the high quality of its core statistical products and assure the success of the 2021 Census, while responding to increased demands arising from the pandemic.

2021 CENSUS OF POPULATION AND HOUSING

The Council notes that while a number of Census-related activities have shifted into the 2020–21 year due to the impacts of COVID-19, preparations remain on schedule. The Council will continue to monitor the progress of the 2021 Census as it moves into the operational phase, and receive regular updates from the ABS.

The final report from the *ANAO Audit: Planning for the 2021 Census* will be made available in the first half of 2020–21, which may provide an opportunity for the Council to be consulted on responses to findings and recommendations.

DATA INTEGRATION AND ACCESS

The Data Integration Partnership for Australia (DIPA), which concluded on 30 June 2020, was a three-year investment designed to maximise the value and use of the Australian Government's data assets.

A significant part of the ABS' contribution to DIPA was its collaboration with other agencies to build on existing data integration and linkage capabilities, and to expand key datasets to meet the policy needs of government and the DIPA analytical units. Even with the conclusion of DIPA, conversations on data

integration are to continue. The Council is ready to advise the ABS on statistical priorities that may emerge.

The Council also anticipates opportunities to advise the ABS on its role in developing data and transparency legislation led by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

ABS' ROLE WITHIN AN EVOLVING INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

The speed and scope of data production continue to increase, with users requiring data that are both more detailed and more timely. ASAC believes that the ABS' responsiveness to the pressures arising from the pandemic demonstrate its ability to add value into the future.

The Council may advise or assist the ABS on sharing its skills to broaden the expertise of data users around the country, including partnering with the Australian Public Service Commission on the development of the 'Data Profession'.

The Council has found a consistent appetite among its member jurisdictions and sectors for investment in increased data capability. The Council would like to see the ABS leverage its recent achievements to affirm its position as a leader in the wider data landscape. The Council will seek to assist the ABS to capitalise on opportunities to help build data capability across government.

In addition to wider capability building, the role of the ABS in achieving greater coordination and consistency among institutions engaged in data collection and provision is an issue that the Council is well-placed to consider.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COMMUNITY TRUST

Maintaining community trust in the ABS — the support of the community for the work it does — is of critical importance, particularly in the lead up to the 2021 Census and during the response to the present crisis. Relevant areas where the Council may be able to advise or assist include data security, data ethics and stakeholder management, including approaches to consultation and transparency around processes.

Membership of ASAC

MEMBERSHIP OF ASAC¹

Member	Date first appointed
Professor Gary Banks AO Professorial Fellow Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research The University of Melbourne	28 February 2017
Dr David Gruen Australian Statistician (ex officio) Australian Bureau of Statistics	11 December 2019
Mr David Byers Chief Executive Officer CO2CRC Limited	30 April 2018
Professor Deborah Cobb-Clark Professor of Economics The University of Sydney	2 November 2015
Dr Luci Ellis Assistant Governor (Economic) Reserve Bank of Australia	2 November 2015

Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver AM

8 April 2013

Deputy Vice Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Service
The University of Sydney

Professor Abigail Payne

30 April 2018

Director and Ronald Henderson Professor
Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research
The University of Melbourne

Ms Meghan Quinn PSM

4 April 2019

Deputy Secretary, Macroeconomic Group
The Treasury

State/Territory representatives

Mr Stephen Walters

Chief Economist, Fiscal and Economic Group
New South Wales Treasury

Mr Antony Skinner

Government Statistician
Queensland Treasury

Mr Stuart Hocking PSM

Deputy Chief Executive
Department of Treasury and Finance, South Australia

Mr Alistair Jones

Executive Director Economic
Department of Treasury, Western Australia

Mr David Braines-Mead

Deputy Under Treasurer
Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory

Mr Stephen Miners

Deputy Under Treasurer, Economic, Budget and Industrial Relations
Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, Australian Capital Territory

CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP IN 2019-20:

The following members and state/territory representatives were appointed to the Council during 2019–20:

- Dr David Gruen
- Mr Stephen Walters*
- Mr Antony Skinner*
- Mr Stuart Hocking PSM

The Council farewelled four members in 2019–20:

- Mr David W. Kalisch: ex-officio member since 15 December 2014, term completed 14 December 2019
 - Mr Adam Boyton: member since 4 April 2019, resigned 14 January 2020.
 - Ms Amy Auster: Victorian Government representative since 23 March 2017, term completed 22 March 2020
 - Mr Anton Voss: Tasmanian Government representative since 14 July 2014, resigned 13 September 2019
-

1. As at 30 June 2020

*Re-appointment

2020-21 ASAC Statement of Intent

2020-21 ASAC STATEMENT OF INTENT

PURPOSE AND ROLE OF ASAC

1. The Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC) was established by the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* (the ABS Act).

The ABS Act (section 18) states that:

(1) The functions of the Council are to advise the Minister and the Statistician in relation to:

- a. the improvement, extension and co-ordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;
- b. annual and longer-term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services; and
- c. any other matters relating generally to those statistical services.

(2) Either the Minister or the Statistician, or both of them, may refer matters of the kind referred to in subsection (1) to the Council for the purpose of seeking the advice of the Council in relation to those matters.

2. In line with its legislated functions, ASAC will represent government and community interests by advising the Minister and the Australian Statistician on Australia's current and longer-term statistical priorities and how the ABS work program can deliver on them.

3. As an advisory forum to the ABS with broad membership and understanding of the wider environment, ASAC will:

- advise the Minister and the ABS in relation to the ABS' functions
- provide input into the strategic directions, risks, priorities and key deliverables of the ABS
- advocate for an effective national statistical system and support the ABS' role within it
- report annually to the Parliament.

4. To help the ABS respond to issues and plan for the future, ASAC will:

- provide the ABS with frank advice and feedback
- draw on the expertise of ASAC members and seek input from stakeholders
- raise risks and identify potential issues
- provide guidance where needed to ensure the ABS remains a trusted and relevant data provider.

5. The Chairperson of ASAC will convey advice to the Minister as appropriate and report back at ASAC meetings.

6. ASAC members are appointed for their ability to identify emerging needs and promote the value of data and its coordination within and across jurisdictions and sectors. They have the seniority to navigate and help influence the decision-making environment and ensure the Council retains a strategic focus.

PRIORITIES FOR 2020–21

- **Advise on the ABS work program under resource constraints and in an environment of global uncertainty** to ensure the ongoing needs of government and stakeholders for quality data can be met in a timely and effective manner.
- **Monitor and advise on 2021 Census preparation**, including: communication strategies and the building of external support, and any recommendations from the *ANAO Audit: Planning for the 2021 Census*.
- **Assist in clarifying ABS roles and responsibilities within an evolving institutional**

landscape, including data integration and access, strengthening data security, the promotion of a coherent broader statistical system and shaping the data landscape across government and beyond.

- **Advise on capability building opportunities** across the public sector and beyond.
- **Assist in building and maintaining community trust**, including advocacy in support of ABS decisions and activities, identifying potential reputational risks and advising on stakeholder engagement.

2020–21 DIRECTIONS

1. Two meetings are planned for 2020–21: November 2020 (Melbourne) and March 2021 (Canberra), noting COVID-19 may affect these planned dates. Additional engagement outside formal meetings may be undertaken as appropriate.

2. In line with requirements prescribed in subsection 24(1) of the ABS Act, ASAC will continue to provide an annual report to the Minister.

ASAC 2019-20 meeting agendas

ASAC 2019-20 MEETING AGENDA

1 August 2019

1. Welcome and introduction
 2. Statistician's report
 3. Members' reports
 4. ABS Strategic Directions
 5. Investment in indigenous information
 6. International Australian Bureau of Statistics engagement
 7. Other business
-

13 November 2019

1. Welcome and introduction
 2. Statistician's report
 3. Members' reports
 4. 2021 Census Update
 5. ABS data protection and security
 6. Community trust and data ethics
 7. Future economic measurement priorities and opportunities
 8. Other business
-

20 May 2020

1. Welcome and introduction
 2. Statistician's report
 3. Members' reports
 4. ABS' response to COVID-19: Organisational
 5. ABS' response to COVID-19: Statistical
 6. ABS Funding Review
 7. Other business
-

ASAC submission to the Australian National Audit Office on Planning for the 2021 Census

ASAC SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE ON PLANNING FOR THE 2021 CENSUS

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE: PLANNING FOR THE 2021 CENSUS

Submission by the
Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC)
13 March 2020

This submission has been prepared as a collective response to David Monk's invitation of 18 February to individual ASAC members in relation to the *ANAO Audit: Planning for the 2021 Census*. It describes the role of ASAC and provides a summary of its activities in relation to the Census. ASAC's chair and secretary would be happy to provide elaboration as required. ASAC members are of course not precluded from making additional separate contributions.

ASAC

The Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC, the Council) was established under the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* to provide independent advice to the responsible Minister and the Australian Statistician on:

- a. the improvement, extension and coordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;
- b. annual and longer-term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services;
- c. any other matters relating generally to those statistical services (subsection 18(1)).

The Council comprises an independent Chairperson, the Australian Statistician (ex officio) and senior officials from the Australian Government and state and territory governments, as well as senior representatives from business, academia and the community sector. ASAC meetings are generally held in person three times a year, but the Council may also interact out of session as appropriate. Adequate time is allowed at meetings for members' input and feedback, which are encouraged by the Chair to be 'free and frank'. ASAC is assisted by a secretariat drawn from the ABS.

The Council's statutory independence and the seniority and experience of its membership enable it to provide higher-level strategic advice that complements input from various technical and representative consultation fora created by the ABS. The Council contributes to ABS decision-making about directions and statistical priorities and helps inform assessments of key risks and strategies.

ASAC/ABS engagement on the Census

At each Council meeting, the Statistician provides a general briefing to members that includes coverage of developments and issues relating to the Census. Periodically, meetings include an agenda item that deals with specific Census matters on which feedback is sought, generally supported by a paper circulated in advance. Thus, while ASAC is not part of the formal governance arrangements for the Census, it has the opportunity periodically to monitor developments and provide advice on key issues.

During 2016-17, the Council engaged in extensive post-mortem discussions with the ABS relating to the **2016 Census** and implications for future censuses. Areas discussed included the operational problems and how these were handled, as well as lessons that emerged (including through external reviews) relating to managing transition to a digital-first Census, effective media and community engagement, improving operational delivery, and understanding the environment externally as well as

within government. Gaining an understanding of how the outcomes from the Census compared to earlier ones was also a point of focus, as well as issues in promoting a wider appreciation of this.

In addition to their contributions through the Council, two members of ASAC served on the 2016 Census Independent Assurance Panel.

It should also be noted that the Council was briefed, and members' views sought, on matters relating to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey 2017 (AMLPS), including through a special teleconferenced meeting.

In preparation for the **2021 Census**, the ABS has kept the Council abreast of preparations and sought its feedback/advice at each meeting since March. Council members have actively engaged in discussions on a variety of topics and issues, including:

- Strategies to address key risks (including those related to technology, maintaining public trust around privacy, etc.)
- Funding requirements and approaches to addressing deficiencies
- Census content development and topics for possible inclusion or removal (including topics that involve significant challenges and sensitivities such as gender/sex related)
- Strategies to improve participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (including the question of a panel to assist with engagement strategies)
- Communication and engagement with the media (including proactive and reactive approaches).

Over the past year, learnings from the earlier AMLPS experience and, especially, the large-scale 'live tests' in country NSW and Queensland in 2019 have provided a focus for discussions concerned with improving operational performance and statistical outcomes in the coming Census.

In the year ahead, and leading up to the 2021 Census itself, ASAC will continue to receive regular updates and other information from the ABS and have the opportunity to provide feedback and engage in discussions with senior officials. The Council will thereby continue to monitor developments and offer advice that draws on the experience and interests of its members, including in the areas of managing key stakeholder relationships and operational risks. That said, the Council recognises that its role in relation to the Census should be regarded as a high-level one that complements the ABS' dedicated internal governance arrangements.

Freedom of Information

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

In accordance with section 8 of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, details of the structure and functions of ASAC and how members of the public can obtain access to information held by the Council are outlined below.

ESTABLISHMENT, ORGANISATION AND FUNCTIONS

For information regarding the establishment, organisation and function of ASAC, see the 'About ASAC' section.

POWERS

As an advisory body, ASAC has no decision-making or other powers directly affecting members of the public. The Council does not administer any enactments or schemes.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR OUTSIDE PARTICIPATION

ASAC members are appointed by the Minister responsible for the ABS to ensure a broad range of views and interests are reflected in the advice that the Council offers to the Minister and the Australian Statistician. For membership details, see the 'Membership of ASAC' section.

Persons or bodies outside the Australian Government administration may contribute matters for the Council's consideration by making representations to the Minister or the ASAC Chairperson. Contributions can be directed in writing to the ASAC Secretary at the address below.

INFORMATION AVAILABLE

The ASAC Annual Report is available from ABS offices, and on the ASAC and ABS websites. The ABS maintains records on behalf of ASAC relating to: the administration of the Council; papers discussed at Council meetings; summary records of meeting proceedings; and correspondence relating to the activities of the Council.

FEEDBACK AND ENQUIRIES

ASAC welcomes feedback on this report. Feedback or enquiries related to accessing ASAC documents, including enquiries under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, may be directed in writing (by post or email) to:

Secretary
Australian Statistics Advisory Council
c/- Australian Bureau of Statistics
Locked Bag 10
Belconnen ACT 2616

Email: asac@abs.gov.au

About this Release

Outlines the functions and activities of the Australian Statistics Advisory Council during 2019-20.